

It is difficult to agree to use pretty much anything on the Internet these days without first agreeing to pages of legal mumbo-jumbo that describes the privacy policy of a certain website or web service. From Facebook to shopping online to perusing the online newspaper, privacy agreements longer than your arm have become normal.

Most users, unsurprisingly, don't read these agreements in full, if at all. Even if you try, and I have tried, the details of what you are agreeing to aren't just in the fine print -- you also seem to have to be able to read between those tiny lines.

There should be nothing complicated about a policy for the Internet that simply says, "Do Not Track." As consumers, we are entitled to express the simple preference to preserve our privacy wherever we shop in person. I don't need to give the cashier my phone number or email address if they ask. I am not forced to sign up for a catalog or a rewards program or a credit card just by choosing to shop at a certain store. So why should shopping, searching, or reading the news be any different online?

I don't know if there are users who wish to be advertised to regarding every site they ever visit, who are comfortable with allowing internet companies to compile a comprehensive database of every preference they've every stated through their online habits. But I am not one of them.

Google does not need to know my favorite color or what I might buy from Amazon.com.

There is a federal role to keeping the Internet safe. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) protect citizens and consumers, respectively, from crimes committed online. And just as the FTC has constructed a Do Not Call list to allow Americans to opt-out of sales calls on the telephone, we should also construct a policy of Do Not Track to allow us to opt-out of the collection of personal information about citizens on the Internet.

Clearly, a vast majority of sites on the Internet rely on advertising to make services and information available for free. Users enjoy a tremendous amount of choice, including the choice to visit sites that advertise to them more than others. We should be given the same choice to

decline to let websites collect, share and sell our private information. It is no accident that the inbox is just as full as the spam folder when we check our email.

As a concept, Do Not Track ought to be simple. We shouldn't have to be lawyers or software programmers to be able to tell how much of our personal information we are agreeing to share when we use the Internet. Congress ought to make it as easy as possible for citizens to protect their privacy online and off. Just as with the exhaustive privacy agreements that continue to accompany most sites, the devil will be in the details.